Songs and Prayers Like Incense: The Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian

J. Barrington Bates

At the beginning of this century, Roman Catholic scholar Charles Herbermann suggested, with a degree of hauteur, that

> LITERARY TASTE is not everywhere and all times the same.... In literature we admire most the qualities of lucidity, sobriety, and varied action. Orientals, on the other hand, never weary of endless repetition of the same thought in slightly altered form; they delight in pretty verbal niceties, in the manifold play of rhythm and accent, rhyme and assonance, and acrostic.[1]

That Ephrem, the fourth-century theologian, serves as an appropriate focus for theological discourse at the beginning of the twenty-first century indicates a shift from the sentiment expressed by Herbermann. Ephrem's relevance cannot be attributed merely to changes in "literary taste," his inclusion in the Episcopal Church's *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* calendar, or the use of one of his hymns (443) in *The Hymnal 1982.* Perhaps the Syriac scholar Sebastian Brock said it best: "Ephrem provides a refreshing counterbalance to an excessively cerebral tradition of conducting theological enquiry."[2] In this counterbalance, we can approach the

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[1] Charles G. Herbermann, *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church* (New York, 1909), 500.

[2] Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (Rome, 1985), 15.

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theological endeavor by entering directly into the mystery of God. Ephrem's hymns provide just such an entry—and one that may seem surprisingly agreeable to modern feminists yet remains orthodox in its fundamental theological principles.

We know few facts about Ephrem, save that he died in June of 373 in Edessa. From a rare autobiographical remark in his hymns, modern Western scholars conclude that both his parents were Christian.[3] The specifics, however, are few. One historian says, "All of these materials are very unreliable.... They contradict each other and are full of legendary matter."[4] Ephrem, according to competing Syrian sources, was the son of a pagan priest. He was instructed by James (or Jacob), bishop at Nisibis, who was known as the Moses of Mesopotamia. Ephrem seems to have accompanied Jacob to the Council of Nicea in 325.

Commemorated variously on 28 January (in the East), on 9 June as a doctor of the church (Roman Catholic),[5] and on 10 June (Episcopal Church, U.S.A.), Ephrem is held in high esteem by the various branches of the church. In the Church of England's newly published calendar, Ephrem receives the status of a "commemoration," on 9 June; although the lowest rank of any observance in this calendar, it is the first time he has been included in an English calendar.[6]

Legends concerning Ephrem abound, proclaiming at least his esteem and regard among later hagiographers. On a certain occasion, says one, Ephrem "cursed from the city walls the Persian

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[3] Ephrem the Syrian, *The Harp of the Spirit: Twelve Poems of Saint Ephrem,* trans. Sebastian Brock (London, 1975), 7.

[4] Philip Schaff, ed., *A Religious Encyclopoedia or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, and Practical Theology* (New York, 1888), I:742.

[5] F. L. Cross, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, 1958), 463. In the Roman Catholic Church, Ephrem was first commemorated on February 1. This was changed to June 18 (when he was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XV in 1920) and to the current date in 1969 (under Paul VI).

[6] Ephrem, for instance is not commemorated in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* or its ancestors, nor in *The Alternative Service Book 1980.* For Ephrem's inclusion in the new calendar, see *The Christian Year: Calendar, Lectionary, and Collects* (London, 1997), 28.

hosts, whereupon a cloud of flies and mosquitoes settled on the army of Sapor II and compelled it to withdraw."[7] One historian describes his outward appearance as that of "a potter's vessel"[8]—though the precise meaning of this intriguing epithet is unclear.

Through his writing, Ephrem demonstrates his triple heritage: as heir of an ancient Mesopotamian tradition, to Judaism, and to the Greek world. By way of example, in his prose works, Ephrem often makes use of a formalized debate between two participants, a device that traces back to Sumerian literature in ancient Mesopotamia.[9] Ephrem, of course, inherited the Hebrew Bible; he also employed a number of themes indicative of the oral tradition of Judaism, such as the creative tension between God's grace and righteous acts. Although Ephrem probably did not read Greek himself, various Greek Christian works were available to him in Syriac. Sebastian Brock notes especially Eusebius's works, such as the *Ecclesiastical History and Theophania* (the latter preserved completely only in Syriac translation), and Titus of Bostra's *Treatise against the Manicheaeans* as documented examples of this resource.[10]

Ephrem thus serves as a meeting point of ancient cultures as his writings do in this article, where the hymns of the ancient East receive the scholarly inspection of the modern West. What appear as eccentricities of Ephrem—in particular, his quirky personality, paradigmatic service as a deacon, and remarkable theology—can heighten interest not only in his works but also in the man himself. The sections to follow will discuss these three facets of his personality.

According to legend, as a boy, Ephrem stood accused of a crime he did not commit. Having once terrorized and tormented a poor man's cow to the point of death, he was later accused of conspiracy with certain sheep marauders. After eighty days' imprisonment, Ephrem stood naked and trembling beside

[7] Herbermann, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 498.

[8] Arthur Vööbus, *Literary, Critical and Historical Studies in Ephrem the Syrian* (Stockholm, 1958), 112.

[9] Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 19.

[10] Ibid, 19–21.

the rack. That the previous two accused perpetrators were found guilty—confessing only after first having been tortured—and that both were sentenced to lose their right hand might well have added to Ephrem's anxiety. Fortunately, a servant intervened to announce that the magistrate's supper was ready. The magistrate, a man of clear priorities, dismissed Ephrem so he could attend to his meal, and Ephrem ran off instantly—to become a hermit remarkable for his severe asceticism.

Ephrem was baptized at the age of eighteen, and this may indicate a deviation from the modern norm. (Scholars suggest that the practice of infant baptism developed later.) The rite of Hippolytus (c.170–c.236 C.E.) presupposed that most of the candidates would be mature persons, a situation that remained normative in Ephrem's time.[11] As his was not an infant baptism with sponsors answering by way of proxy, one can assume Ephrem's mature profession of faith at the time of his baptism.

Ephrem received the title "Peaceable Man of God" due to his "conspicuous virtue of meekness."[12] Although he received no formal education, Ephrem became expert in the most "abstruse problems of philosophy. His style of writing was so full of glowing oratory and sublimity of thought that he superseded all the writers of Greece."[13] Yet he chose to communicate not primarily through argument or didactic prose—but through the use of imagery, metaphor, and symbol.

A contemporary of Basil and Gregory Nyssen, Ephrem most probably died a deacon. Once, when reportedly elected bishop, Ephrem "comported himself so strangely that the people and clergy, supposing him to have lost his mind, chose another in his place."[14] Ephrem, it seems, preferred to remain in the order to

[11] Charles P. Price and Louis Weil, *Liturgy for Living* (San Francisco, 1979), 107.

[12] Brock, Introduction, in Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NJ, 1990) 10.

[13] Brock, Introduction, in Ephrem, *Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York, 1989) quoting Hermias Sozomenus's *Ecclesiastical History: A History of the Church in Nine Books* (London, 1846) 10.

[14] Ibid, 11.

which he felt called, the diaconate. He also maintained a celibate life, "exempt from the love of vain-glory."[15] In spite of numerous temptations, Ephrem, according to Sozomenus, "refrained from looking upon woman."[16] One might imagine that Ephrem bore resentment to this calling, given the somewhat unusual method with which he discerned a call to the monastic lifestyle—but this is apparently not the case. Although "naturally prone to passion," Ephrem, legend says, "never exhibited angry feelings towards any one from his embracing of a monastic life."[17] Instead, he remained devoted to the celibate life and to the deacon's responsibility to Christian service.

During a famine in Edessa, Ephrem quit his solitary cell, however, creating what may well have been the first Christian homeless shelter. Tending all who suffered from the effects of the famine, Ephrem set up 300 beds in the public galleries for this purpose. The historian of early monasticism Palladius (c. 365–425 C.E.) tells us in his *Lausiac History* that Ephrem chided the rich, saying "Why do you not have pity on the people who are perishing, instead of letting your wealth rot for the condemnation of your own souls?"[18] Further, Palladius says Ephrem "spent every day in constant attendance on [the hungry], seeing to their every need with great caring, making use of the means available to him. This he did joyfully, with the help of those whom he had asked to assist."[19]

"On the cessation of the scarcity, he returned to his cell; and after the lapse of a few days expired."[20] Thus Ephrem missed categorization as a martyr—i.e., dying in service of the faith—by less than a week. Nevertheless, his work models the values mod-

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[15] Hermias Sozomenus, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. anon. (London, 1846), 134.

[16] Ibid, 133–34.

[17] Ibid, 134.

[18] Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (Westminster, Maryland, 1965), 117.

[19] Brock, Introduction, in Ephrem, *Paradise*, 14.

[20] Ibid, 12.

ern Christians hold up as paradigmatic of the diaconate: serving all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely, studying holy Scripture, and making Christ and his redemptive love known by word and example.[21]

Ephrem expressed his theology primarily through the vehicle of poetry. In this, he expanded theological definitions and boundaries. To Ephrem, theological definitions were not only potentially dangerous, but they could even be blasphemous. To delimit or define God would be to contain that which was not containable, to limit that which had no limits, to describe that which could not be fully known.

Sebastian Brock puts a question in Ephrem's mouth, and, while this is undoubtedly a cultural projection of the West, it helps us to comprehend something of the implicit understanding of the East:

> If definitions of faith appear to confine within boundaries the boundless God, how then should the theologian try to proceed? The search for theological definitions, a heritage from Greek philosophy, is of course by no means the only way of conducting theological enquiry. Ephrem's radically different approach is by way of paradox and symbolism, and for this purpose poetry proves a far more suitable vehicle than prose, seeing that poetry is much better capable of sustaining the essential dynamism and fluidity that is characteristic of this sort of approach to theology.[22]

This is not to say that Ephrem was an extremist in his time, in any way heretical, or sought to change the common understanding of the divine. Ephrem was, first and foremost, an orthodox theologian. He took for granted that God's name was *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,* even as he sought to provide rich and colorful imagery for the Trinity.

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[21] From the Ordination of a Deacon, in *The Book of Common Prayer* [1979] (New York, 1977), 543.

[22] Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 24.

For the first person of the Trinity, for instance, Ephrem provided the following alternative namings: Eternal One, Creator, Good One, Just One—saying "he is also named and called 'father.'" Ephrem wrote:

The scriptures are the crucible;
 why does the fool gainsay it?
Contemplate in his crucibles,
 his names and distinctions.
For he has names,
 perfect and exact,
he also has names
 metaphorical and transient.
Have a care for his names
 perfect and holy,
for if you deny one
 they will all fly away.[23]

Thus, the creator God who is the first person of the Trinity is both "Father" *and* the "Good One"—and *both* are meaningful names.

The theology Ephrem espoused was that of the "eternal now." His concept of sacred time—as distinguished from ordinary, or linear, time—allowed him to pursue paradox, tension, and juxtaposition without conceding to a contradiction. The individual could merge into the collective, an example into the concept it represents, and our time into all time. This fluidity of thought allowed Ephrem to pursue metaphorical allusions for God, who was to him—and at some very basic level—unknowable, indescribable, and undefinable. Ephrem was comfortable, for instance, with the contradictory statement that "our Lord has brothers—and yet he has none, for he is the Only-begotten."[24]

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[23] Ephrem, quoted in Sidney H. Griffith, *Faith Adoring the Mystery: Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian* (Milwaukee, 1997), 28.

[24] Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith,* No. 82, in Brock, *Twelve Poems*, 32.

Ephrem was, however, aware of one clear distinction: that between the Creator and his creation. He speaks of this as a "chasm," across which "what is made cannot reach its Maker."[25] Through this understanding, Ephrem is able to maintain a basic assumption about the nature of being: that the intellect that has knowledge of something must be greater than the object of its knowledge.[26] While one might quibble with this—allowing for partial knowledge of God, for instance—one cannot help but see in it an adherence to conventional wisdom and understanding. Ephrem, therefore, was no heretic.

Challenging heretics was, in fact, one of Ephrem's notable occupations. Some ten heretical sects were active in Edessa, and Ephrem contended vigorously with all of them. A significant segment of his *opus*, including many of his hymns, fall into the category of refutations of heresies. "How much Marcion lied I will show, for he speaks not from the true foundation," Ephrem said in a Gospel commentary.[27] Another hymn contained the refrain, "Blessed is He Who blotted him out and has afflicted all the sons of error!"[28] Heretics, to Ephrem, included both theologians and politicians, and he contended as vigorously with the Emperor Julian as with iconoclastic theologies.[29]

Thus, Ephrem held to a fundamental assumption of orthodox faith. He did not seek to create a new belief system; rather, he held to eternal truths. Only after accounting for this essence of faith did Ephrem consider exploring poetical images and metaphors. While his work may help expand the Western image and understanding of God, it in no way deviated from the eternal catholic truths held by the church.

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[25] Ibid, 30:2, in Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 26.

[26] Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 26.

[27] Ephrem, *An Exposition of the Gospel,* trans. George A. Egan (Louvain, 1968), 1.

[28] Ephrem, *Hymns against Julian,* No. 2, in Ephrem, *Hymns,* 234.

[29] E.g., *Hymns against Julian* in Ephrem, *Hymns,* and the more than 50 *Hymns against Heresies* (not currently available in English translation).

The Syrian tradition upheld the importance of a theological and liturgical synthesis—as a glimpse of the invisible achieved through the visible—including text and tune, word and action, content and signification. "The precise nature of the 'mystery' (a favorite word of Ephrem's) of the Incarnation was totally beyond the probings of man, and could only be approached by means of the language of metaphor, and—most important—in the context of prayer and wonder."[30] In other words, to the Syrian, humans could not truly know God, but only catch a glimpse of God's glory.

According to Wolfhart Pannenberg, if the divine reality cannot be experienced directly, then "it can be spoken of only in an indirect manner, viz., by speaking about whatever worldly being it is through which the reality of God manifests itself."[31] This was Ephrem's perspective, that "everything is of significance and has the potential of being a pointer to Christ: all that is required is the eye of faith to see these hidden links."[32]

These invisible tethers were particularly evident in the hymns on the nativity by Ephrem, possibly because the Incarnation is the place where the divine and the human meet and even coexist. Ephrem claimed that "the Deity imprinted Itself on humanity, so that humanity might also be cut into the seal of the Deity."[33] The nativity hymns also focused on Mary, the mother of God, and in this one can recognize a prototype of later catholic piety: "In the sphere of religion we can dimly recognize the germ of our own religious practices, not merely in the liturgy, the penitential psalm, the antiphon, the precentor, the incense, and the rest, but in the *mater dolorosa*."[34]

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[30] Sebastian P. Brock, "The Poet as Theologian," *Sobornost* 7, no.4 (1977): 244.

[31] Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Analogy and Doxology," in *Basic Questions in Theology, Volume I*, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia, 1970), 212.

[32] Brock, "Poet as Theologian," 245.

[33] Ephrem, quoted by Kathleen E. McVey in her introduction to Ephrem, *Hymns* (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1989), 31.

[34] Henry George Farmer, "The Music of Ancient Mesopotamia" in *New Oxford Dictionary of Music: Ancient and Oriental Music*, vol. I, ed. Egon Wellesz (London, 1957), 254.

Ephrem insisted on multiple possibilities of interpretation for every passage of scripture. In one commentary, he said,

> If there were [only] one meaning for the words [of Scripture], the first interpreter would find it, and all other listeners would have neither the toil of seeking nor the pleasure of finding. But every word of our Lord has its own image, and each image has many members, and each member possesses its own species and form. Each person hears in accordance with his capacity, and it is interpreted in accordance with what has been given to him.[35]

Thus, Ephrem emphasized a multivalent symbolic character of scripture, in specific, and theology in general—preferring to embrace a multiplicity of appropriate theological images, rather than resorting to any one correct explanation or single definitive interpretation.

In the southeastern portion of modern Turkey lies the city once known as Edessa and now known as Urfa. It is less than two hundred miles inland from ancient Antioch (now called Antakya) and under fifty miles from the current Syrian frontier. The site of Nisibis—the town where Ephrem was born, now also within Turkish borders—is approximately another hundred miles inland, to the east of Edessa.[36]

In Edessa as in his native Nisibis, Ephrem lived not only with Christians but among Arameans, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, Parthians, Romans, and Iranians.[37] Babylonian gods, Hellenistic and Roman deities, and Arab cults all existed concurrently. Gnostic and Manichean forms of Christianity enjoyed substantial followings at Edessa, as well. Although Constantine's reign (306–337 C.E.) brought relative peace, Ephrem and his fellow Nisibians came under Persian siege

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[35] Ephrem, quoted in Griffith, *Faith Adoring the Mystery,* 32.

[36] Geographical information is taken from F. van der Meer and Christine Mohrmann, *Atlas of the Early Christian World,* May F. Hedlund and H. A. Rowley, trans. and eds. (London, 1958), 11 ff.

[37] Kathleen E. McVey, Introduction, in Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns,* trans. McVey (New York, 1989), 5.

several times, including the capture of Nisibis in 363, an event that caused Ephrem to relocate to a cave near Edessa.[38]

In Ephrem's time, a life of austere simplicity was held in high regard among Syrian Christians. Those living such a life were no mere monastics, but true hermits living a life of severe self-denial. "In the fourth century, the life of the anchorite had been the norm for a long time for those who wished to pursue a rigorous style of Christianity, and a monastic, communal life was more the exception than the rule."[39]

This reclusive lifestyle was a way of living out not so much a vocation to lead a solitary life as the need of each person "given over to the life of perfection to find a suitable expression of his or her individual style."[40] Attaining this perfection—or harmony with God and with God's creation—was an ambition of every committed Christian, each in his or her own very personal manner. To these fourth-century Christians, we are week and imperfect as human beings, and attaining perfection becomes a life-long goal. By way of example, Ephrem compared God's perfection with human weakness in this very graphic stanza from one of his *Hymns on Paradise:*

All that we eat
    the body eventually expels
in a form that disgusts us;
    we are repelled by its smell.
The burden of food debilitates us,
    in excess it proves harmful,
but if it be joy
    which inebriates and sustains,

[38] J.O. Thorne and T.C. Collocot, eds., *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* (Edinburgh, 1984), 460.

[39] Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York, 1992), 153.

[40] Ibid, 154.

how greatly will the soul be sustained
on the waves of this joy
as its faculties suck
the breast of all wisdom.[41]

Jacob of Nisibis, Ephrem's first bishop, "lived out of doors, except in winter, when he lived in a cave. He did not eat food that he or others had worked for; what he ate, he ate raw, and he wore only primitive clothes."[42] Ephrem referred to Jacob directly, describing "reverently and repeatedly...certain ascetic labors."[43] This very individualistic behavior may seem, to modern eyes, odd indeed for a member of the historic episcopate, but it was his way of approaching the elusive goal of perfection.

The individualism of the Syrian tradition of Christianity could sometimes express itself in an overemphasis on personal religious experience and prayer at the expense of the sacraments and more institutional aspects of the Christian life. Syrians had little use for conventional relationships, including marriage. In fact, by the fourth century in Syrian Christianity, "it was thought that the sexual component of married life made it impossible for the lay Christian to approach perfection."[44]

Within the context of this individualism, Syrian spirituality in the fourth century is characterized by a way of seeing and meditating upon the things of God that can loosely be called "symbolic." It entailed a kind of double vision that saw—simultaneously—the visible, physical world *and* the hidden realities of God concealed within it. These hidden realities were conveyed through scripture, Christ, the church, and the sacraments, by means of faith and the Holy Spirit. This paradoxical view—i.e.,

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[41] Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, No. 9, Stanza 23, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, New York, 1990), 144.

[42] McGinn and Meyendorff, *Christian Spirituality*, 154.

[43] Arthur Vööbus, "History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient," *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 184 (1958): 142.

[44] McGinn and Meyendorff, *Christian Spirituality*, 156.

the tension between the fundamentally antithetical concepts of the visible and the hidden—found a particular richness of expression in the vocabulary of the solitary celibate Ephrem.

Ephrem and his fellow monks "lived a life which reduced them to a state of wild animals. They lived with animals, ate grass with them, and perched on the rocks like birds." Monks of Ephrem's ilk despised life itself, not taking any precautions against savage animals and snakes, living lives "dreadfully disfigured by hunger,"[45] and performing ruthless acts of chastisement and mortification, making them wrecks. In short, Ephrem and his fellow religious sought to accentuate the distance between human weakness and divine glory.

If Ephrem really was the greatest Syriac-speaking writer of them all, perhaps it was because his writing spoke so powerfully of the paradox of divine majesty "made totally available to a single, frail human being,...a whole Christian society...rendered visible in the figure of the Virgin holding the Ruler of All on her knees. All [our] deepest hopes and fears about the access of the weak to the powerful, of humanity to God, [are] clustered around the crib at Bethlehem."[46]

Through the individualistic vehicle of his hymns, Ephrem sought to maintain the tension between such theological contradictions. He accepted that God's nature, in all its mystery, could not be understood through human investigation or rational argument. Ephrem was also aware, on the other hand, that the deity had made himself available in the incarnation, so that through faith and love believers could "walk in the spiritual countries."[47] Ephrem's work was doxological—that is, grounded in the praise of God. Speaking to Mary of Jesus, Ephrem said, "He drank from your breast visible milk, but he drank from His

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[45] Vööbus, "History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient," 152.

[46] McGinn and Meyendorff, *Christian Spirituality*, 439.

[47] Ibid, 158.

bosom hidden mysteries."[48] These hidden mysteries were the object of Ephrem's reverence and praise.

Early Christian music included psalmody, hymns, and spiritual songs, and stemmed from a variety of roots. Neither psalmody—the singing of Jewish psalms and of the canticles and doxologies modeled on them—nor spiritual songs—such as alleluias and other chants of a jubilant or ecstatic character—appeared in Ephrem's works, although both undoubtedly had voice in his time. It was, however, through Ephrem's hymns—songs of praise of a syllabic type—that he gained a reputation as leader of a literary movement.[49]

By the time the Christian faith was introduced in the East, a rich pagan literature in the vernacular already existed. Both specific poetic syllabic patterns and forms of musical notation existed in the pre-Christian East. Syrian poetry of the period consisted of three major forms, *memrâ, madrâshâ,* and *sogîthâ,* and Ephrem wrote in all three forms. Various less prevalent forms also existed, including brief poems interpolated between psalm verses and *qâlâ* (which is, curiously, translated "tune"), or poems of several stanzas with no refrain. Some small number of these intended to be sung at funerals are also attributed to Ephrem. Scholars suggest, however, that most Syriac hymns were such *qâlâ* —intended to be "sung in alternating strophes interpolated between the verses of the psalms or canticles."[50]

Ephrem's homilies serve as illustrations of *memrâ,* as they consist mostly of lines of five syllables. Five, seven, or twelve syllables per line are all legitimate expressions of this form. Scholars suggest these *memrâ,* were chanted by a solo voice rather than being sung together by all the assembly. The system of punctuation clearly indicates phrases for such chanting.

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[48] Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity,* No. 25, in Hymns, 371.

[49] Wellesz, "Early Christian Music," 2–8.

[50] Heinrich Husman, "Syrian Church Music," in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* vol. 18 (London, 1980), 477.

The *sogîthâ* form, however, finds little expression in the works of Ephrem. These are dramatic poems, probably sung by two soloists and two choirs. Frequently, this form appeared in situations where a biblical character speaks in a kind of dialogue with a narrator. Based on Greek models, the *sogîthâ* was connected with Syriac literature, even if Ephrem did not seem to prefer it.

Ephrem was a master of the *madrâshâ* style; in fact, one scholar even credits him with its invention.[51] This kind of strophic poem, frequently sung by a soloist, included a kind of antiphon, or congregational refrain. Ephrem used the *madrâshâ* form "in theological controversy to refute the arguments of his opponents and to inspire his followers; at a later stage he turned it into a lyrical form and gave it the character of a hymn."[52]

This information may lead us to broaden our definition of the term "hymn," as it suggests that early hymnic material—in the Syrian vein, at least—was not strictly metrical (i.e., restricted to a specific number or pattern of syllables), may not have been sung by the entire congregation gathered, and often did not conform to any scheme of rhyme.[53] This *madrâshâ* form is a category of independent strophic hymn, in which each strophe is followed by a short refrain, whose melody is generally that of the first half of the strophe.[54]

No manuscripts of Syrian music of this period exist, and some scholars suggest much of it was never written down. Modern Syrian chant is based on a measured rhythm, and has a character much more rhythmic and syllabic than Gregorian plainsong. To the degree modern Syrian chant relates to early chant is a matter of conjecture and dispute, however, and one must exercise cau-

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[51] Husman, "Syriac Church Music," in Sadie, *The New Grove*, 18:477.

[52] Wellesz, "Early Christian Music," 9.

[53] While rhyming schemes are central to most modern hymns, rhyme is not a relevant concept, at least in Western poetry, before the Latin hymns of Ambrose. See Richard H. Hoppin, *Medieval Music* (New York, 1978), 34–36.

[54] Husman, "Syriac Church Music," in Sadie, *The New Grove*, 18:478. The form is the ancestor of the Byzantine *kontakion*, well known to American Episcopalians through its use in the burial office. See *The Book of Common Prayer*, 499, or *The Hymnal 1982*, 355.

tion when making any such comparison.[55] Indeed, given the texts that survive, it is difficult to imagine that Ephrem concerned himself with anything even remotely like the strictly metrical character of modern Syrian chant.

Ephrem drew on his own tradition, including the popular (though heretical) composers of his time. One characteristic trait of Syrian music is the "use of standard melodies for a number of different poems of a similar verse pattern,"[56] and Ephrem excelled at this. He set his own texts to the tunes of Bardesanes, whose metrical psalms were popular in Ephrem's time, and still sung until the first half of the fifth century.[57] Bardesanes (properly "Bar-Daisan," 154–222 C.E.), whose Gnostic doctrine Ephrem "strongly denounced,"[58] earned the title of Father of Syrian Poetry through his metrical psalms. What little is known of Bardesanes's theology was learned mostly from its refutation in Ephrem's work.[59] In retribution for Bardesanes's heresies, Ephrem, one historian tells us, composed new psalms based on the same meter and with the same verse and stanza structure. In spite of this retributive borrowing, most of Ephrem's melodies were, in fact, original to him, discrediting the medieval tradition that early Christian hymn writers frequently used "secular or pagan melodies in order to win the hearts of the people."[60] "One can only regret, there seems to be no way of restoring the musical melodies, which he doubtlessly composed also, and which were an integral part of his meditation on the mysteries of the faith."[61]

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[55] Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969), 727.

[56] Ibid, 829.

[57] Dimitri Conomos, "Bardasian [Bardesanes]," in Sadie, *The New Grove*, 2:150.

[58] Thorne and Collocot, *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, 94.

[59] H. J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, trans. G. E. van Baaren-Pape (Assen, The Netherlands, 1961), 3.

[60] Husman, "Syrian Church Music," in Sadie, *The New Grove*, 18:478.

[61] John Meyendorff, Preface, in Ephrem, *Hymns*, 1.

Syrian musical notation employed a system of *ecphonetic* chant, not unlike the system used for Gregorian chant. Through the interpretation of signs known as "neumes," one understands, even centuries after its being written down, how to sing a plainsong melody. Such ecphonetic notation was employed in the "solemn reading of the lessons and the signs used to regulate its performance in all the eastern churches."[62] In this notation, nine signs—consisting of dots and dashes inserted with the text (above, below, before, after words)—regulate the pitch, inflection, and breathing. In such neumatic notation, each syllable is set to a *neume*—or group of signs, corresponding to as few as one or as many as five or more notes.[63] The neume notation was used to indicate change in pitch and, especially, to mark melismatic sections of text. Such neumatic notation may have served only "as a kind of memory aid for a singer who already knew the melody."[64]

Ephrem wrote primarily in isosyllabic construction; that is, his verses have an equal number of syllables, without regard to poetic meter and regular stress pattern.[65] One scholar suggests the deviations in stress occur "to avoid monotony;" this feature makes it "difficult to adopt a regular musical meter" for such texts, as "metrical variants in the poetry would upset the musical scheme, and the placement of accents might shift from one stanza to another."[66]

In summary, much of Syriac music of the fourth century was intended for singing in a liturgical context—and sometimes in particular positions (such as the proclamatory function of the homily) where one would not consider singing normative today.

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[62] Wellesz, "Early Christian Music," 10.

[63] Richard H. Hoppin, *Medieval Music* (New York, 1978), 78.

[64] Ibid, 59.

[65] Isosyllabic construction is characteristic of Syriac poetry to this day, having "an influence on the sacred poetry of other oriental and occidental liturgies as well." See Stephen Douayhi, *The Syriac Model Strophes and Their Poetic Meters*, trans. Louis Hage (Kaslik, Lebanon, 1987), 27.

[66] Hoppin, *Medieval Music*, 113.

The musical notation was—by modern standards—both simple (in that it did not use a staff or key signature) and complex (in that subtleties of text and stress informed the performance). Ephrem wrote in several fairly rigid structures—much of it isosyllabic in construction.

Ephrem once said he was "compelled by the love of friends" in his vocation as a writer.[67] His writings were known to both John Chrysostom and Jerome.[68] While the *Lausiac History* says only that Ephrem left "some writings"—most of which Palladius considers "worthy of attention"[69]—scholarship tells us that, of all the Patristic fathers, only John Chrysostom has more surviving material than Ephrem.[70] Ephrem was indeed prolific, producing more than 1,000 sermons and tracts, exegetical, dogmatic, and ascetic, according to one account contemporaneous to him.[71]

His writings were held in high esteem in his time, being read next to the scriptures in some places.[72] Ephrem's Syriac originals were translated into Greek while "he was still living, or at least not long dead"[73]—and also into Arabic, Ethiopian, and later Slavonic and Latin and from these into French, German, Italian, and English. Thus, his poetry has a far greater impact than if it had remained available in Syriac only. Ephrem also composed many exegetical writings, based on a scriptural canon resembling our own.[74] Ephrem is described thus as an exegete: "sober, exhibit[ing] a preference for the literal sense,...discreet in his use

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[67] R. M. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesium et in Exodum commentarii*, trans. Mathews & Amar (Louvain, 1955), 152:3.

[68] Schaff, *Religious Encyclopoedia*, 1:742.

[69] Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 117.

[70] Kathleen McVey, General Introduction, in Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, trans. Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar (Washington, 1994), 39.

[71] Schaff, *Religious Encyclopoedia*, 1:743.

[72] Samuel N. C. Lieu, ed., Introduction to Chapter 3, "From Ctesiphon to Nisibis," in *The Emperor Julian: Panegyric and Polemic* (Liverpool, 1986), 99.

[73] Farmer, "Music of Ancient Mesopotamia," 254.

[74] Ibid, 254.

of allegory; in a word he inclines strongly to the Antiochene school."[75] While the distinction between Alexandrian and Antiochene theology is a much later one (made clear only with the christological controversies of the fifth century), one can recognize certain factors—such as Ephrem's emphasis on the humanity of Jesus—as attributable to the Antiochene school of thought.

Of Ephrem's surviving prose works, most fall into two categories: (1) refutations of heresies and (2) commentaries on various books of the Bible.[76] Ephrem was a prolific commentator on scripture, writing—legend boasts—a commentary on each and every book in the Bible. Surviving works include commentaries on Genesis and Exodus, various homilies, and miscellaneous other minor works.

In his homilies, Ephrem does not employ a verse-by-verse method of explication and exposition, relying instead on a discussion of texts of particular theological interest to him. In his *Exposition of the Gospel,* for instance, Ephrem broadly compares the teaching of Jesus to garments, which "keep the cold and heat and outrages from all who may be clothed with them."[77] He seems particularly drawn to texts whose "orthodox interpretation needs to be reasserted in the face of contemporary heterodox ideas."[78] His exegesis avoids the rigidity and precision "that generally characterized contemporary theological inquiry informed by Hellenistic philosophical categories."[79] In exegetical works, Ephrem generally "proceeds like an Antiochene, proposing to comment first literally and then 'spiritually.'"[80] This kind of simple yet loose structure characterizes his prose work.

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[75] Herbermann, *Catholic Encyclopedia,* 499.

[76] Brock, *Twelve Poems,* 9.

[77] Ephrem, *Exposition,* 11.

[78] McVey, General Introduction, in Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works,* 43.

[79] Ibid, 47.

[80] Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1975), 47.

His prose work, in short, remains flexible, graceful, even fluid—and unconfined by more exacting analytic structures or schemes. Even Ephrem's prose works hold a kind of poetical character—for they are most frequently written in an unvarying isosyllabic pattern, the so called "meter of Ephrem" of fourteen syllables per line, in two groups of seven each.[81] "Elaborate rhetorical figures and stylistic devices joined with a Semitic love for both parallelism and paradox" characterize his writings—further reinforcing the notion that even his prose is, by some definition, poetic.

Ephrem's poetry, like his prose, also falls into two clear categories: (1) verse homilies, which scholars suggested were recited, and (2) hymns, consisting of stanzas which were clearly intended for singing. Brock describes his hymns as "soaked in scripture."[82] In his hymnody, Ephrem constructed the stanzas of individual hymns on a single syllabic pattern.[83] Fifty or more patterns appear in his surviving hymns.[84] Rhyme appears only rarely, and then only for special effect. This makes a study-in-translation more feasible than might otherwise be possible, as something of the richness of the imagery can be maintained in translation, even if some of the subtlety of expression is necessarily lost.

Ephrem wrote hymn cycles *On Virginity* (consisting of 52 hymns), *On the Nativity* (28), *Against [Emperor Caesar] Julian* (4), and *On Paradise* (15). These and another 11 miscellaneous hymns are currently available in English translation. In addition, hymns exist on various other topics: *On Nisibis, On the Church, Against Heresies, On Lent,* and *On the Paschal Season.*

Ephrem's hymns have a character of complexity about them. They make free use of such devices as typology, wordplay, paradox, repetition, and metaphor to convey to the listener the richness of the reality hidden in the visible *raze'* (symbols, sacra-

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[81] McVey, General Introduction, 42.

[82] Sebastian P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1987), 31.

[83] Brock, in Ephrem, *Paradise,* 36.

[84] McVey, General Introduction, 41. Several hundred hymns of Ephrem survive to the present.

ments) and *remze'* (signs).[85] Ephrem's hymns, however, seem to assume a foundation of literal commentary and often begin from a spiritual and metaphorical perspective. In his hymns, he frequently employs doctrinally expansive concepts, without any preceding Antiochene literalism.

Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity,* for instance, as they meditate on Mary, reveal something of the depth and insight of Ephrem, who was not afraid to make use of feminine imagery. By way of example, Ephrem makes frequent reference to God's womb, viz.:

> If anyone seeks Your hidden nature
> behold it is in heaven in the great womb
> of Divinity. And if anyone seeks
> Your revealed body, behold it rests and looks out
> from the small womb of Mary![86]

Twenty-eight hymns constitute the cycle of *Hymns on the Nativity*—as large a collection of related material as survives in Ephrem's extant work available in English translation.[87] Unlike various other collections of Ephrem's hymns, some of which appear to be randomly assembled by later editors and named for the subject of the first hymn in the collection only, the cycle of *Hymns on the Nativity* has its own thematic integrity.

Ephrem saw the church in history as the intermediary "between the former types and the eschatological fulfillment."[88] In this, the Incarnation plays a significant role, of course. The birth of Jesus provides a certain focus as the beginning event of this fulfillment. Therefore, the nativity hymns play a significant

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[85] McGinn and Meyendorff, *Christian Spirituality,* 157.

[86] Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity,* No. 13, Stanza 7, in Ephrem, Hymns, 138.

[87] Although the cycle of Hymns on Virginity contains more individual hymns than the Hymns on the Nativity, closer inspection reveals that the hymns in that cycle have little relation to each other. The "Virginity" title appears to derive from the subject of the first hymn, and many of the subsequent hymns are refutations of heresies and other matters unrelated to virginity *per se.*

[88] Murray, *Symbols,* 54.

role in Ephrem's *opus*. The core of this particular collection is a set of sixteen hymns probably gathered and entitled "lullabyes" (in Syriac, *nwsrt'*) by Ephrem himself.[89] Four other hymns were added by an anonymous sixth-century editor, and eight others on the subject of the birth of Christ included by a modern scholar. The entire collection is available in modern English, and one hymn, at least, exists in various English translations, allowing for another sort of textual comparison.

In *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem employed an extraordinarily rich metaphorical vocabulary. He described God as the "voice that became a body,"[90] and Jesus as "the Babe who is more ancient than his bearer."[91] Father, Son, and Holy Ghost may be God's name to the Orthodox, but this did not prevent Ephrem from taking great freedom in the use of epithets. In fact, in most of his hymns Ephrem never used such a formal name. While his motivation for evading direct reference to the Trinity may elude modern readers of his work, one can imagine his hymns sung in a liturgical context already full of trinitarian language. Perhaps he considered such explicit reference in a hymn redundant. In any case, Ephrem expanded our idea of God by the use of such names as "the Pleasant One," "the Hidden One," and "the Compassionate One."

Ephrem also engaged the Incarnation with explicit, graphic, and even precarious imagery, saying of the baby Jesus,

> He was lofty but he sucked Mary's milk
> and from his blessings all creation sucks.[92]

In numerous of Ephrem's nativity hymns, Mary sang a mother's simple song to her baby, bidding tenderly to the infant God, for instance, "Come and rest and be quiet in the lap of your

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[89] McVey, General Introduction, 29.

[90] Ephrem, *Hymns*, 4:143.

[91] Ibid, 12:1.

[92] Ibid, 4:149.

mother."[93] But Ephrem also affirmed the essential paradox of the Incarnation, saying

> Mary's lap astonishes me that it sufficed for you, my Lord,
> and embraced you.
> The entire creation was too small to hide your majesty.[94]

Thus, Ephrem's poetry points us to the awesome majesty of God's working in the world, acknowledging the immanence of the holy in this world while embracing a vast diversity of images, metaphors, and symbols for the ultimate mystery that is God.

Ephrem's hymns are but one positive archetype of the rich tradition from which we descend, albeit an archetype that sets a standard for excellence. His hymns are not just "embellishments to the service, as a means of edification for the people whilest [*sic*] other activities [are] in progress."[95] Hymns of such quality as Ephrem's have an integral relationship to liturgy. They are more than embellishments because they provide a corrective to literalism and definitions, which Ephrem regards as "static and deadening in their effect."[96] To Ephrem, God simply defies definition, in spite of our need to explain, and Ephrem's hymns resound the beauty of this paradox.

J. Barrington Bates *is currently enrolled in the doctoral program in liturgical theology at the General Theological Seminary, New York.*

[93] Ibid, 14:1.

[94] Ibid, 23:11.

[95] Alan Dunstan, "Hymnody in Christian Worship," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarold, eds., *The Study of Liturgy* (New York, 1978), 463. Dunstan summarizes Percy Dearmer, who states that between Epistle and Gospel is "an excellent place from the liturgical point of view" to sing a hymn, "because there is here an necessary interval." See Dearmer, *The Parson's Handbook* (London, 1921), 220 f.

[96] Sebastian P. Brock, "The Syriac Tradition," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Spirituality* (New York, 1978), 206.